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AUTHOR Farren, Sean N.
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ABSTRACT

A study examined classroom practices in English, social studies, and science classrooms, seeking information on the purposes for which teachers assign reading within their specific disciplines, the reading activities that might be associated with such assignments, and the assistance or guidance that teachers might give their students to help them carry out these assignments. The results of the questionnaire completed by first-year secondary school teachers indicated that reading assignments that required students to review the content of lessons, or to elaborate on that content accounted for more than 50% of all reading assignments. Answering questions, orally or in writing, accounted for almost half the activities in the classroom. Assistance with lexical items, or vocabulary, was the most reported prereading activity--more direct assistance for dealing with ideas of text was reported much less frequently. In terms of cross-disciplinary comparisons, it is discouraging that the general science teachers seldom reported assigning readings beyond the immediate lesson in a discipline that should be encouraging curiosity. It is also discouraging that questions requiring only literal understanding of a reading passage accounted for most of those asked and that the level of explanation of the aims for the social studies reading assignments was low. The results highlight the need for teachers to monitor constantly their classroom practice in light of the aims and objectives they set for themselves. (HTH)

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Reading Assignments Across the Curriculum

- A Research Report

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Sean N. Farren
Education Centre
The New University of Ulster
Coleraine
N. Ireland

CS 007229

Introduction

The absence of detailed information providing a picture of how teachers across the various disciplines at secondary school level plan the use of reading has only been fully acknowledged in recent years as reading specialists have attempted to define and meet the needs of such teachers. Hitherto, their needs have tended to be assumed rather than determined on the basis of any investigation into how they themselves viewed reading within their different disciplines. So instead of undertaking the necessary research to out just how teachers at this level plan and use reading, specialists have tended to adopt a prescriptive approach based, at best, on experimental results developed under laboratory type conditions,or at worst on what seemed to be good advice with little or no basis in studies of classroom practice.

Classroom based research of the kind which would provide this information has been pioneered in Britain in the very extensive set of studies directed at Eric Lunzer and Keith Gardner (1979). In the United States the more focused classroom studies reported by Dolores Durkin (1979) also contribute to the kind of information with which this paper deals.

The Lunzer and Gardner studies are quite comprehensive including as they do a number of linked investigations, under the general heading of 'effective uses of reading', carried out in secondary schools. Ranging from detailed studies of the readability of texts used in different subject areas to

the nature and incidence of reading in the classroom and reading for home study, to the use of reading in conjunction with various learning activities, these studies provide a detailed base-line for further research.

Durkin's study which is specifically concerned with the kind of assistance students receive in order that they should comprehend what they read is important because of the light it throws on the teacher's role as 'director of learning' as opposed to 'dispenser of information', etc., and particularly on the teacher's approach to the use of texts in the learning process.

In brief, what these studies and the study to be reported on in this paper attempt to provide, is a profile of classroom practice across various disciplines of secondary education with respect to teachers' plans for and use of reading. On the basis of such information discussion can be opened up with teachers many of whom have traditionally not seen themselves as concerned with developing their students' reading competence.

Among the precise issues that information must be sought on are the purposes for which teachers assign reading within their specific disciplines, the non-reading acitvities which might be associated with such assignments and the assistance or guidance teachers might give their students to help them carry out these assignments. Other questions would include attempts to discover the criteria teachers use in selecting texts for their subject areas, the amount of reading and the

assignments, the non-reading activities associated with them and the kinds of assistance given in order to help students undertake them are the features of reading in several subject areas reported in this paper.

General Purposes

General purposes were defined for this investigation in such a way as to allow cross-disciplinary comparisons to be made. This indicated four content related purposes and teachers were asked to state which, if any, of these purposes had determined the assignments set. The four were, reviewing class work, elaborating on class work, preparing for a new topic and becoming acquainted with another view or approach to the content of the assignment.

The Lunzer and Gardner studies referred to above also surveyed assignment purposes, though in their work failure to distinguish between purposes, as defined here, and activities or exercises associated with the set readings makes detailed comparison difficult. However, since their studies did identify a number of the same general purposes dealt with here some comparisons can be drawn. The present study also allowed teachers to indicate if purposes other than those listed had motivated the assignments, but the only other purpose noted was 'enjoyment' reported by several

/English teachers.

Activities

The activities investigated were as follows, answering accompanying questions orally or in writing, undertaking an extended piece of writing, engaging in a discussion, carrying out a non-literary activity, e.g. drawing a picture, map, doing a science experiment, etc., and finally no acitivity. This final category, although not reported by any teacher was included because it might be appropriate that a reading assignment be set which required no specific follow-up of the other kinds listed. Again some comparison is possible with the more extensive Lunzer and Gardner studies.

Quite apart from noting the actual ac tivites as such, it is important that some attempt be made to determine the intellectual demands which the assignments made on their readers. A number of studies, e.g. Gallagher (1965), Davis and Tinsley (1967), have suggested that teachers themselves tend to pose an apparently disproportionate number of low-level oral questions, or, using Barratt's term, 'literal questions'. As for questions posed in texts across the curriculum Gibbons (1980) found that fifty per cent of the questions in those she examined were 'reorganisational', nineteen were inferential and one per cent 'evaluative'. How to judge the appropriateness of this weighting is difficult if not impossible in an abstract sense because questions arise from the context in which the reading takes place.

Since teachers, however, need to be aware of the kind of questions they ask an analysis of a sample of set questions is presented in this study using Barratt's

Pre-Reading Teacher Assistance

Perhaps the most important issue in this study is the teacher's role in guiding or assisting students to cope with their reading assignments. Durkin's study is seminal since she sought to discover through means of direct classroom observation what kind of assistance students receive in order that they might comprehend what they read. Her findings, if of general application, indicate that very little positive assistance is in fact provided. Less than one per cent of the time of the twenty-four teachers observed was found to have been devoted to what Durkin termed 'comprehension instruction'*. In contrast to the absence of such instruction considerable time was observed being devoted to assessing literal knowledge of what had been read.

Lunzer and Gardner do not report quite so directly on the kind of guidance, or instruction provided by teachers in the schools they surveyed. Two sections of their report do allow, however, some inferences to be drawn as to what might have been provided and both suggest a minimal amount of guidance.

'Comprehension instruction' was defined by Durkin as "the teacher saying or doing something to help children understand or work out the meaning of more than a single word".

Their survey of reading in the classroom revealed that most of the sustained reading was student initiated and in the report is termed 'personal reading'. On average, eleven to twelve minutes per day were taken up with such reading. The report indicates, and most primary and junior school teachers would probably confirm it, that such reading develops from the practice of encouraging students to read their own choice of text in between more formal classroom activities. This kind of reading is very frequently undertaken without specific guidance, or direction.

The second kind of classroom reading reported by Lunzer and Gardner is termed by them 'short-burst reading', i.e. reading not lasting more than half a minute on average. Such reading was done for the purpose of discovering facts and, apart from the questions designed to direct the readers' attention to these facts, no guidance which could be described as 'comprehension instruction' was reported.

Reading for homework was also surveyed by Lunzer and Gardner. Again, apart from setting tasks, the teachers surveyed did not usually discuss or give any guidance as to how these tasks might be undertaken. The inference to be drawn is that the teachers saw reading 'as reading, as reading, as reading'. Students were assumed to be able to read and therefore to have mastered the necessary study skills involved in reading for learning. No specific action was called for to develop these skills, or even to check that students were competent in them. In fact the question didn't even arise.

Evidence points to a general absence of clear and specific guidance of this kind. McGale (1981) in a case study of reading in the context of the transition from primary to secondary school found, as he puts it, secondary school teachers to be "in the dark" as to how they might provide such guidance. The teachers, he reports, recognised the need to assist students in their reading, but did not seem to accept responsibility for developing competence in this area.

The present study sheds a little more light on this issue particularly in terms of the inter-disciplinary contrasts which emerge. The categories of pre-reading assistance in this study were described as follows, the explanation of difficult/specialist terms, of complex or difficult language structures and of the aims of the assignment; the suggestion of helpful questions to guide students' reading and of any additional references which might be helpful to the topic. Other forms of assistance and no assistance at all were also to be noted. In the case of 'no assistance' it was carefully explained that this category can have a positive meaning, pedagogically speaking, since it might well be very appropriate for the teacher not to give any overt, specific kind of assistance for particular reading assignments.

Design of Study

The study was carried out by means of a questionnaire which was presented and explained by the author to the teachers who agreed to participate in the survey. The survey was described to them as having the objective of discovering how teachers planned the use of extended reading assignments within their particular disciplines.

The disciplines were chosen to represent literature, English in this case, Social Studies, which in this study is a generic term including history, geography, religious studies and in one school home economics. General Science was the third disciplinary area and had no sub-divisions since that is the title of scientific studies for the early years of secondary education.

The participants were all experienced first year secondary teachers. This stage was chosen since it is then for the first time that students encounter these disciplines in a very formal way, primary education not being based on a highly subject or discipline differentiated curriculum. It was hoped that a profile of practices and approaches to reading across the curriculum would be particularly pertinent to discussion of this transition period as well as to the general problems of reading across the curriculum for whatever stage.

Teachers from five schools agreed to participate. Seven different classes in all were involved, 22 of whose teachers completed the questionnaire to give details of 105 assignments set over a period of four to eight weeks in the second half of the school year. During this period schools were visited by the author to afford teachers an opportunity of raising any questions dealing with the completion of the questionnaires.

Survey Findings

Table 1 presents details of the distribution of the assignments across the various disciplines.

Table 1

Distribution of Assignments

Discipline Areas		per cent
English	41	39.0
Social Studies	46	44.0
General Science	18	17.0
Total	105	100

Purposes

Tables 2,2a,2b and 2c show the distribution of the frequency which teachers reported the various purposes listed, first in all areas and then separately for each area on its own.

Table 2

Distribution of General Purposes - All Areas

Purposes		per cent
Reviewing class work	31	23.0
Elaborating on class work	45	33.3
Preparing for a new topic	26	19.3
Becoming acquainted with with another view or approach	21	15.6
Other purposes	12	8.9
Total	135	100

Table 2a

Distribution of General Purposes - English

Purposes	Raw score	per cent
Review class work	9	18.0
Elaborating on class work	12	24.0
Preparing for a new topic	7	14.0
Becoming acquainted with another view or approach to a topic	10	20.0
Other purposes (enjoyment)		
Total	50	100

Table 2b

Distribution of General Purposes - Social Studies

Purposes	Raw score	per cent
Reviewing class work	9	16.1
Elaborating on class work	21	37.5
Preparing for a new topic	17	30.4
Becoming acquainted with another view or approach to a topic	9	16.1
Other purposes	-	-
Total	56	100

Table 2c.

Distribution of General Purposes - General Science

Purposes	Raw Score	per cent
Reviewing class work	13	44.8
Elaborating on class work	12	41.4
Preparing for a new topic	2	6.9
Becoming acquainted with another view or approach to a topic	2	6.9
Other purposes	-	-
Total	29	99.1

Activities

Tables 3,3a,3b and 3c summarise the analysis made of the number of times the different kinds of activities associated with the texts assigned were prescribed. Again this analysis is presented for all assignments together and then separately for assignments according to discipline area.

Table 3.

Distribution of Associated Activities - All Areas

Purposes	Raw Score	per Cent
Accompanying questions to be answered	82	49.4
Extended writing	23	13.9
Discussion	26	15.7
Practical activiety	35	21.9
No associated activity	-	-
Total no. of activities	166	100

Table 3a

Distribution of Activities - English

Associated Activities	Raw Score	Per cent
Accompanying questions to be answered	26	38.2
Extended writing	14	20.6
Discussion	18	26.5
Practical activity	9	13.2
No associated activity	-	-
Total no. of activities	68	100

Table 3b

Distribution of Activities - Social Studies

Associated Activities	Raw Score	Per cent
Accompanying questions to be answered	50	62.5
Extended writing	7	8.8
Discussion	6	7.5
Practical activity	17	21.2
No associated activity	-	-
Total no. of activities	80	100

Table 3c

Distribution of Associated Activities - General Science

Associated Activities	Raw score	Per cent
Accompanying question to be answered	6	31.6
Extended writing	2	10.5
Discussion	2	10.5
Practical activity	9	47.4
No associated activity	-	-
Total no. of activities	19	100

Pre-Reading Assistance

The following tables, 4,4a,4b and 4c present an analysis of the manner in which the teachers reported the distribution of their assistance to their students to help them carry out these assignments.

Table 4

Distribution of Forms of Assistance - All Areas

Forms of Assistance	Raw score	Per cent
Explanation of difficult or specialist terms	52	31.5
Explanation of difficult or complex language structures	21	12.7
Explanation of assignment aims	42	25.5
Suggestion of helpful questions	21	12.7
Suggestion of additional references	5	3.0
Other forms of assistance	20	12.1
No assistance	4	2.4
Total no. of forms of assistance	161	100

Table 4a

Distribution of Forms of Assistance - English

Forms of Assistance	Raw score	Per cent
Explanation of difficult or specialist terms	14	23.7
Explanation of difficult or complex language structures	6	10.2
Explanation of assignment aims	19	32.2
Suggestion of helpful questions	6	10.2
Suggestion of additional references	2	3.4
Other forms of assistance	11	18.6
No assistance	1	1.7
Total no. of forms of assistance	58	100

Table 4b

Distribution of Forms of Assistance - Social Studies

Forms of Assistance	Raw score	Per cent
Explanation of difficult or specialist terms	25	32.1
Explanation of difficult or complex language structures	13	16.7
Explanation of assignment aims	12	15.4
Suggestion of helpful questions	14	17.9
Suggestion of additional references	3	3.9
Other forms of assistance	8	10.3
No assistance	3	3.8
Total no. of forms of assistance	75	100

Table 4c

Distribution of Forms of Assistance - General Science

Forms of Assistance	Raw score	Per cent
Explanation of difficult or specialist terms	13	46.4
Explanation of complex or difficult language structures	2	7.1
Explanation of assignment aims	11	39.3
Suggestion of helpful questions	1	3.6
Suggestion of additional references	-	-
Other forms of assistance	1	3.6
No assistance	-	-
Total no. of forms of assistance	28	100

Discussion

Purposes

It is perhaps not surprising to find that reading assignments have as very frequent purposes elaborating on or reviewing class work. The former accounted for 23 per cent of the purposes reported, the latter for 23 per cent. In other words reading assignments which require students to review the content of lessons, or to elaborate on that content account for more than 50 per cent of all such assignments. This expected finding is also borne out by the Lunzer and Gardner studies.

However the general finding masks an interesting contrast which emerges when a cross-disciplinary comparison is made. The extent to which both these purposes influence reading assignments varies from a combined 42 per cent for English, to 85 for General Science, with Social Studies reporting 53 per cent. English assignments are influenced by a more even distribution of purposes across the four stated categories together with a high percentage from the fifth or 'other purposes' category, mainly enjoyment. Social Studies reports the highest percentage for reading as preparation for a new topic, while General Science would seem to regard both this category and the fourth, reading to become acquainted with another approach or view of a topic, as considerably less important than the other two.

It is difficult to draw precise conclusions from these findings. It may be that these distributions are appropriate. English teachers at this stage, using a wide variety of texts, narrative and non-narrative are likely to base their assignments on a number of different purposes. Social Studies and, in particular, General Science which are more highly structured in terms of content and restricted in the use of basic texts are more likely, therefore, to base assignments on what has been introduced and discussed in class. It is, however, somewhat worrying that teachers of General Science, teaching a subject which one might expect to have as a general educational aim the encouragement of a curious mind, do not appear, as the low percentages for categories three and four suggest, to be setting assignments which might achieve that objective. This apparent conservative trait may come from a concern on the part of these teachers not to confuse students with ideas etc. which have not been introduced and explained in class. Whatever the explanation, the finding is an important point to be raised with these teachers.

Activities

Lunzer and Gardner's studies and another by Knox (1982) found that answering questions, orally or in writing, was, perhaps not surprisingly, the activity most frequently associated with reading assignments. The present study supports their findings with almost 50 per cent of the activities being accounted for in this way. Again there is an interesting spread of emphases when cross disciplinary comparisons are made. Social Studies places much greater emphasis on this activity than does either English or General Science. For the latter a practical activity, obviously carrying out an experiment, is the most frequent. In practice of course many questions are likely to be asked in the course of the experiment and after it, so that too much can't be read into this finding at this stage. The low, 8.8 per cent, frequency of extended writing in Social Studies needs closer examination as does the slightly lower 7.5 per cent. frequency of discussion. Social Studies might be expected to have reported a much higher frequency for discussion than 7.5 per cent.

English again reflects the more balanced distribution across the categories though once more this might be a function of the variety of reading undertaken and the general nature of the subject at this stage.

In order to provide additional information on the nature of these activities the written questions accompanying a sample of the texts were examined and classified according to Barratt's taxonomy. The sample yielded 274 questions distributed as shown in Table 5. The sixth category, which is not part of Barratt's set contains questions requiring extra textual reference.

Table 5

Distribution of Sample Questions
(Barratt's Taxonomy)

1 literal	2 Reorgan.	3 infer.	4 eval.	5 apprec.	6 ex-tent.	Total
80	90	54	12	10	28	274
29%	33%	20%	4%	4%	10%	100%

What an ideal balance should be is probably impossible to determine, and so the overall balance reflected here cannot be judged in the abstract. It is probably true to say that a considerable number of lower order questions must be asked for every higher order question. The balance here within the five categories of Barratt's taxonomy, for 274 questions is that categories 1 and 2, which require literal understanding, account for over 60 per cent of these questions, a figure that is usually adversely commented upon by classroom researchers e.g. Gallagher (1965) and Davis and Tinsley (1967). It may be that classroom discussion redresses any imbalance revealed by these figures, but evidence about teacher led discussion in the classroom, Barnes (1969) is not

/encouraging.

Pre-Reading Assistance

The findings in this section are perhaps the most interesting in terms of what they may be able to indicate regarding reading pedagogy practices. With a total of 161 forms of assistance reported there was an average of 1.5 forms provided per assignment. Assistance with lexical items, or vocabulary, was perhaps not unexpectedly in view of what is known in this regard, the single most reported form. Explaining the general aims of the assignments from the point of view of their content was second. More direct assistance for dealing with ideas of text in terms of helpful questions came a much lower third overall. This low figure would seem to be supporting Durkin's finding that assistance with the actual text beyond the level of linguistic explanations, which altogether account for 45 per cent of the assistance, is infrequent. This finding is even more interesting and disturbing in view of the fact that when asked to indicate the kinds of reading difficulties their students seemed to experience most, a very large proportion of the teachers (70%) rated the lack of study skills very highly. However, it may be reassuring that setting students to read without giving them any assistance was very infrequently reported.

On a cross-disciplinary comparison the contrasts are perhaps not as sharp as in the other two areas. The high incidence of lexical explanation in the sciences is to be expected. The low level of encouragement to use additional references to the class text in Social Studies suggested by the figure of 3.8 is worrying and bears further investigation. Also the

absence of any reported explanation of the aims for many of the reading assignments in this same area where one might expect such explanations, dealing as these studies do with social issues in history, geography, religious studies, etc. prompts further investigation in order to find out what extent students understand why they are reading what is assigned. The question as to whether they are simply reading to carry out the activities associated with the assignment, or because problems have been raised for which they are trying to seek answers is the issue. To some extent the nature of the activities provides evidence to answer this question. The fact that such a high proportion of the published questions only demand literal understanding suggests that reading without any other purpose but to discover certain details is likely to have been the dominant motive.

Interestingly, despite this considerable experience of reading for literal understanding the principal kind of assistance reported by the teachers was with respect to vocabulary. Indeed, an assessment of pupils' reading competence revealed that vocabulary is their greatest single weakness. This being so, however, questions need to be raised with the teachers as to how effective their assistance with vocabulary is. Merely explaining unfamiliar and, or specialist terms is unlikely to improve competence with word meaning. Indeed a dependence on this kind of teacher assistance can result, obviating any need on the students' part to develop his/her own individual competence. Other important weaknesses revealed for which no evidence of assistance was obtained were inthe students' competence to handle the sequence of ideas, and to identify main ideas.

As in Durkin's study the nature of pre-reading assistance provided by many teachers continues to be a matter of general concern. It appears that this assistance lacks focus except for vocabulary and some general explanation of the aims and activities associated with the reading assignments and that even in these respects it may not be very effective.

Conclusion

This study adds to the growing evidence about teacher approaches to reading assignments at early secondary level. It has again highlighted the need, already identified by other researchers, for teachers themselves to constantly monitor classroom practice in the light of the aims and objectives they set themselves. Only when teachers undertake this monitoring and discuss their own results with their colleagues are the questions posed thereby likely to achieve effective classroom results.

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